

History of a HYMN

Ever wonder about the people who wrote the words to hymns in *Christian Worship*? Cecil Frances Alexander wrote the words to "Once in Royal David's City," one of my favorite Christmas hymns.

Born in 1819, she excelled in writing verses for children, designing many of her poems and hymns to explain the basic doctrines of Christianity. Why did she design her verses that way? Apparently she overheard her godchildren discussing how dreary the catechism seemed to them. This motivated her to write in a way that made catechism concepts more meaningful and interesting to youth.

Some of her hymns include "All things bright and beautiful" (teaching the concept "I believe in God"), "There is a green hill far away" (teaching "was crucified, died, and was buried, and "Once in royal David's city" (teaching "And in Jesus Christ . . . who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary"). These hymns were all published first in her book *Hymns for Little Children* (1848), which went through 67 editions before the end of the century. In all, Alexander wrote 400 hymns and poems.

[Information taken from *Christian Worship Handbook*, C.F. Aufdemberge, ©1997, Northwestern Publishing House, pp. 70, 632.]

Picture this



For a period of about a month, the ages of the missionary children on the Russian field were: 8,7,6,5,5,4,3,3,2,1,0. Unfortunately, our record of having a child born every year is in danger of being broken.

Top row, left to right: Nicholas Oblender (8), Daniel Ewart (7), Nathan Ewart (5), Zachary Oblender (6), Peter Oblender (2). Bottom row, left to right: Natasha Oblender (5), Christina Wolfram (4), Katie Wolfram (3), Jonathan Ewart (7 months), Anna Ewart (3), Lara Rohrbach (1).

Our motto: "We'll grow the Russian church one way or another."

Missionary Michael Ewart
Iskitim, Russia

Send pictures to Picture this, Forward in Christ magazine, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398. On a separate sheet, give us information about the photo. Those whose photos are chosen will receive a small gift.

Vacation Bible study ideas

Cross of Christ, Liverpool, N.Y., a congregation of about 50 members without a full-time pastor, came up with some creative ideas for its three-day vacation Bible school (VBS) this past summer:

- The congregation uses *Christ-Light*® for its Sunday school, but can never use all the material. So they decided to use *Christ-Light* manuals as guides for their VBS lessons and activities. They then wrote one Bible study and had each teacher adapt the lesson for different age groups.
- Instead of daily craft projects, students had a daily cooking project. Each day each child received a small pizza box containing a disposable apron, a copy of the day's recipe, a thank-you prayer, a ziplock bag, and the recipe ingredients. Recipes coordinated with the lesson theme for the day (for example s'mores went with the theme "When things get sticky.") Each child was encouraged to take home the treats—and the day's Bible story—to share with their families.

Cross of Christ had 12 children—six of them nonmembers—attend its vacation Bible school.





Gary P. Baumler is editor of *Forward in Christ* magazine and WELS Director of Communications.

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Conflicted at Christmas

“Why,” I ask myself, “am I so conflicted at Christmas?”

Does that question resonate with you too? You know you should feel happy, but your happiness keeps mixing with melancholy. You get excited to see so much of the world come alive with Christmas spirit, but you don’t see much evidence of the Holy Spirit. The people cry, “Happy birthday, Jesus!” But they have no room for him in their homes. You hear, “Peace! Let there be peace on earth.” But turmoil titillates and tests you—without and within.

Why so conflicted?

I thought I found the key to the conflict when I paid a visit to the Internet, looking for sites about Christmas. One site, for example, asked the question: “What makes Christmas such a big deal?” The answer: Some 1.8 billion Christians in the world follow Jesus, so his birth means a lot to them. Then, in the 1860s, Macy’s in New York City started the trend to capitalize commercially on the celebration. Today many retailers make as much as 70 percent of their revenues in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Many Christians, much commercialism—little Christ!

Looking to other sites, I found Christ, but he was greatly outnumbered and in places completely eclipsed by Santa.

“Aha! There’s the answer,” I thought. The people around me are creating the conflict. Their failure to center on Christ and their propensity for popular Christmas platitudes are ruining Christmas. All the glitz and glee gut the season. People that don’t really know pretend to say what Christmas means. I’m just glad I’m not like them.

Here I pause, take a deep breath, and reconsider. Not like them? But I am.

Blame them? They can’t make me feel conflicted. It’s not new that the world does not welcome Christ. No, if I feel conflicted at Christmas, then I need ask only, “What’s wrong with me?”

I know the answer to that question. I think that you do too. Not only do I, too, get distracted by many non-spiritual outside attractions at Christmas—I get distracted by me. I struggle with my weaknesses, my sins. My conscience gives me conflict. I worry about my own comforts, so I can barely see the Christ—born in a stable. I recount all my sufferings and cry woe is me—hardly remembering the suffering in store for baby Jesus. I get so busy thinking about what is bad that I forget to think about God. I block out Christ.

I look at me, and I see someone unworthy of Christmas and too often unmindful of its blessings.

Only when I look at Christ Jesus does the conflict resolve itself. The child of the manger is the God of the heavens. The child of the manger came to save me and you. The child of the manger gave up heaven’s glory to take away my gloom.

“Come to me,” he says, “and I will give rest to your soul.”

“My peace I give you. Not as the world gives!”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . . I am the way and the truth and the life.”

“Take heart! I have overcome the world.”

“Remain in my love.”

Yes, I can still feel conflicted at Christmas, but not when I look to Jesus.

Gary P. Baumler